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RUEHLH/AMCONSUL LAHORE PRIORITY 5422
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C O N F I D E N T I A L ISLAMABAD 001757

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PK](#) [PREL](#)
SUBJECT: BY-ELECTIONS POSTPONED

REF: ISLAMABAD 1735

Classified By: Anne W. Patterson, Reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: In a tactical move designed to frustrate Nawaz Sharif, the Pakistan People's Party is delaying National and Provincial Assembly by-elections from June 18 to August 18. The delay allows PPP Co-Chairman Asif Zardari time to determine if the coalition can settle the judges issue. If talks on the judges fail and Nawaz leaves the coalition, Zardari does not want Nawaz in a position to seek the prime ministership. The first step would be qualifying in parliamentary elections. The delay also prevents Shahbaz Sharif from formally becoming Chief Minister of the Punjab. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Pakistan's Election Commission (ECP) announced late May 5 that the June 18 by-elections have been postponed two months to August 18. Eight National Assembly seats and a total of 30 seats in the four Provincial Assemblies are up for grabs. These seats remain vacant either because one of the original candidates passed away before the February 18 general elections or because a winning candidate renounced one seat for another.

¶3. (C) ECP Secretary Kunwar Dilshad stated to the press that security concerns prompted the decision to delay the by-elections. He cited a letter by Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) Chief Secretary Sahibzada Riaz Noor requesting the postponement for the handful of races to be held in his area because he feared election violence.

¶4. (C) Nomination papers were due by tomorrow, May 6. According to the Chief Election Commissioner's Private Secretary Sadiq Khan, the entire schedule for nominations, scrutiny and campaigning will be modified. Khan added that he did not expect the ECP to release the new timeline until after the National Assembly's June budget session was concluded. Nominations thus far filed will reportedly remain valid; new nominations will also be accepted.

¶5. (C) A Pakistan People's Party (PPP) representative claimed surprise at the ECP's announcement. Information Minister Sherry Rehman said that none of the parties making up the new GOP were consulted. Coalition partner Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) spokesperson went further, charging President Musharraf with manipulating the electoral system and frustrating the public will.

¶6. (C) However, PPP Co-Chairman Zardari May 3 and Interior Minister Rehman Malik May 4 told Ambassador that the PPP was postponing the by-elections. Malik said the ECP would cite

concerns about violence in the NWFP. The real reason, explained by Zardari (reftel) was his desire to stop Nawaz Sharif from starting down the road to becoming Prime Minister. Neither Zardari nor Nawaz now hold seats in parliament, a requirement to become Prime Minister. Nawaz must also overturn the current constitutional two-term limit on prime ministers if he wants the job again. The Supreme Court in April struck down a requirement that parliamentary candidates have a university degree; that cleared the way for Zardari to run. However, he told Ambassador May 3 that for family reasons he does not want to become Prime Minister right now. That does not mean he wants Nawaz to move forward toward his ambitions. Delaying the by-elections will also deny Shahbaz Sharif, who needs to win a provincial by-election, from taking the chair as Chief Minister of the Punjab.

17. (C) Comment: Zardari is keeping his options open by ensuring that, should the negotiations over restoring the judiciary fail and Nawaz quits the coalition, Nawaz will not be positioned to become Prime Minister after a new election. This delay is another signal to Nawaz that Zardari runs the government. End comment.

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